THE BRILLIANT AND THE COMMONPLACE.

BY MORTON COLMAN.

DAY after day I worked at my life-task, and worked in an earnest spirit. Not much did I seem to accomplish; yet the little that was done had on it the impress of good. Still, I was dissatisfied, because my gifts were less dazzling than those of which many around me could boast. When I thought of the brilliant ones sparkling in the firmament of literature, and filling the eyes of admiring thousands, something like the evil spirit of envy came into my heart and threw a shadow upon my feelings. I was troubled because I had not their gifts. I wished to shine with a stronger light. To dazzle, as well as to warm and vivify.

Not long ago, there came among us one whom nature had richly endowed. His mind possessed exceeding brilliancy. Flashes of thought, like lightning from a summer cloud, were ever filling the air around him. There was a stateliness in the movement of his intellect, and an evidence of power, that oppressed you at times with wonder.

Around him gathered the lesser lights in the hemisphere of thought, and veiled their feebler rays beneath his excessive brightness. He seemed conscious of his superior gifts, and displayed them more like a giant beating the air to excite wonder than putting forth his strength to accomplish a good and noble work. Still, I was oppressed and paralyzed by the sphere of his presence. I felt puny and weak beside him, and unhappy because I was not gifted with equal power.

It so happened that a work of mine, upon which the maker's name was not stamped—work done with a purpose of good—was spoken of and praised by one who did not know me as the handicraftsman.

"It is tame, dull, and commonplace," said the brilliant one, in a tone of contempt; and there were many present to agree with him.

Like the strokes of a hammer upon my heart, came these words of condemnation. "Tame, dull, and commonplace!" And was it, indeed, so? Yes; I felt that what he had uttered was true. That my powers were exceedingly limited, and my gifts few. Oh, what would I not have then given for brilliant endowments like those possessed by him from whom had fallen the words of condemnation?

"You will admit," said one—I thought it strange at the time that there should be even one to speak a word in favor of my poor performance—"that it will do good?"

"Good!" was answered, in a tone slightly touched by contempt. "Oh yes; it will do good!" and the brilliant one tossed his head. "Anybody can do good!"

I went home with a perturbed spirit. I had work to do; but I could not do it. I sat down and tried to forget what I had heard. I tried to think about the tasks that were before me. "Tame, dull, and commonplace!" Into no other form would my thoughts come.

Exhausted, at last, by this inward struggle, I threw myself upon my bed, and soon passed into the land of dreams.

Dream-land! Thou art thought by many to be *only* a land of fantasy and of shadows. But it is not so. Dreams, for the most part, *are* fantastic; but all are not so. Nearer are we to the world of spirits, in sleep; and, at times, angels come to us with lessons of wisdom, darkly veiled under similitude, or written in characters of light.

I passed into dream-land; but my thoughts went on in the same current. "Tame, dull, and commonplace!" I felt the condemnation more strongly than before.

I was out in the open air, and around me were mountains, trees, green fields, and running waters; and above all bent the sky in its azure beauty. The sun was just unveiling his face in the east, and his rays were lighting up the dew-gems on a thousand blades of grass, and making the leaves glitter as if studded with diamonds.

"How calm and beautiful!" said a voice near me. I turned, and one whose days were in the "sear and yellow leaf" stood by my side.

"But all is tame and commonplace," I answered. "We have this over and over again, day after day, month after month, and year after year. Give me something brilliant and startling, if it be in the fiery comet or the rushing storm. I am sick of the commonplace!"

"And yet to the commonplace the world is indebted for every great work and great blessing. For everything good, and true, and beautiful!"

I looked earnestly into the face of the old man. He went on.

"The truly good and great is the useful; for in that is the Divine image. Softly and unobtrusively has the dew fallen, as it falls night after night. Silently it distilled, while the vagrant meteors threw their lines of dazzling light across the sky, and men looked up at them in wonder and admiration. And now the soft grass, the green leaves, and the sweet flowers, that drooped beneath the fervent heat of

yesterday, are fresh again and full of beauty, ready to receive the light and warmth of the risen sun, and expand with a new vigor. All this may be tame and commonplace; but is it not a great and a good work that has been going on?

"The tiller of the soil is going forth again to his work. Do not turn your eyes from him, and let a feeling of impatience stir in your heart because he is not a soldier rushing to battle, or a brilliant orator holding thousands enchained by the power of a fervid eloquence that is born not so much of good desires for his fellow-men as from the heat of his own self-love. Day after day, as now, patient and hopeful, the husbandman enters upon the work that lies before him, and, hand in hand with God's blessed sunshine, dews, and rain, a loving and earnest co-laborer, brings forth from earth's treasure-house of blessings good gifts for his fellow-men. Is all this commonplace? How great and good is the commonplace!"

I turned to answer the old man, but he was gone. I was standing on a high mountain, and beneath me, as far as the eye could reach, were stretched broad and richly cultivated fields; and from a hundred farm-houses went up the curling smoke from the fires of industry. Fields were waving with golden grain, and trees bending with their treasures of fruit. Suddenly, the bright sun was veiled in clouds, that came whirling up from the horizon in dark and broken masses, and throwing a deep shadow over the landscape just before bathed in light. Calmly had I surveyed the peaceful scene spread out before me. I was charmed with its quiet beauty. But now, stronger emotions stirred within me.

"Oh, this is sublime!" I murmured, as I gazed upon the cloudy hosts moving across the heavens in battle array.

A gleam of lightning sprang forth from a dark cavern in the sky, and then, far off, rattled and jarred the echoing thunder. Next came the rushing and roaring wind, bending the giant-limbed oaks as if they were but wands of willow, and tearing up lesser trees as a child tears up from its roots a weed or flower.

In this war of elements I stood, with my head bared, and clinging to a rock, mad with a strange and wild delight.

"Brilliant! Sublime! Grand beyond the power of description!" I said, as the storm deepened in intensity. "An hour like this is worth all the commonplace, dull events of a lifetime!"

There came a stunning crash in the midst of a dazzling glare. For some moments I was blinded. When sight was restored, I saw, below me, the flames curling upward from a dwelling upon which the fierce lightning had fallen.

"What majesty! what awful sublimity!" said I, aloud. I thought not of the pain, and terror, and death that reigned in the human habitation upon which the bolt of destruction had fallen, but of the sublime power displayed in the strife of elements.

There was another change. I no longer stood on the mountain, with the lightning and tempest around me; but was in the valley below, down upon which the storm had swept with devastating fury. Fields of grain were level with the earth; houses destroyed; and the trophies of industry marred in a hundred ways.

"How sublime are the works of the tempest!" said a voice near me. I turned, and the old man was again at my side.

But I did not respond to his words.

"What majesty! What awful sublimity and power!" continued the old man. "But," he added, in a changed voice, "there is a higher power in the gentle rain than lies in the rushing tempest. The power to destroy is an evil power, and has bounds beyond which it cannot go. But in the gentle rain that falls noiselessly to the earth, is the power of restoration and recreation. See!"

I looked, and a man lay upon the ground apparently lifeless. He had been struck down by the lightning. His pale face was upturned to the sky, and the rain, shaken free from the cloudy skirts of the retiring storm, was falling upon it. I continued to gaze upon the face of the prostrate man, until there came into it a flush of life. Then his limbs quivered; he threw his arms about. A groan issued from his constricted chest. In a little while, he arose.

"Which is best? Which is most to be loved and admired?" said the old man. "The wild, fierce, brilliant tempest, or the quiet rain that restores the images of life and beauty which the tempest has destroyed? See! The gentle breezes are beginning to move over the fields, and, hand in hand with the uplifting sunlight, to raise the grain that has been trodden beneath the crushing heel of the tempest, whose false sublimity you so much admired. There is nothing startling and brilliant in this work; but it is a good and a great work, and it will go on silently and efficiently until not a trace of the desolating storm can be found. In the still atmosphere, unseen, but all-potent, lies a power ever busy in the work of creating and restoring; or, in other words, in the commonplace work of doing good. Which office would you like best to assume—which is the most noble—the office of the destroyer or the restorer?"

I lifted my eyes again, and saw men busily engaged in blotting out the traces of the storm, and in restoring all to its former use and beauty. Builders were at work upon the house which had been struck by lightning, and men engaged in repairing fences, barns, and other objects upon which had been spent the fury of the excited elements. Soon every vestige of the destroyer was gone.

"Commonplace work, that of nailing on boards

and shingles," said the old man; "of repairing broken fences; of filling up the deep foot-prints of the passing storm; but is it not a noble work? Yes; for it is ennobled by its end. Far nobler than the work of the brilliant tempest, which moved but to destroy."

The scene changed once more. I was back again from the land of dreams and similitudes. It was midnight, and the moon was shining in a cloudless sky. I arose, and, going to the window, sat and looked forth, musing upon my dream. All was hushed as if I were out in the fields, instead of in the heart of a populous city. Soon came the sound of footsteps, heavy and measured, and the watchman passed on his round of duty. A humble man was he, forced by necessity into his position, and rarely thought of and little regarded by the many. There was nothing brilliant about him to attract the eye and extort admiration. The man and his calling were commonplace. He passed on; and, as his form left my eye, the thought of him passed from my mind. Not long after, unheralded by the sound of footsteps, came one with a stealthy, crouching air; pausing now, and listening; and now looking warily from side to side. It was plain that he was on no errand of good to his fellow-men. He, too, passed on, and was lost to my vision.

Many minutes went by, and I still remained at the window, musing upon the subject of my dream, when I was startled by a cry of terror issuing from a house not far away. It was the cry of a woman. Obeying the instinct of my feelings, I ran into the street and made my way hurriedly towards the spot from which the cry came.

"Help! help! murder!" shrieked a woman from the open window.

I tried the street door of the house; but it was fastened. I threw myself against it with all my strength, and it yielded to the concussion. As I entered the dark passage, I found myself suddenly grappled by a strong man, who threw me down and held me by the throat. I struggled to free myself; but in vain. His grip tightened. In a few moments I would have been lifeless. But, just at the instant when consciousness was about leaving me, the guardian of the night appeared. With a single stroke of his heavy mace, he laid the midnight robber and assassin senseless upon the floor.

How instantly was that humble watchman ennobled in my eyes! How high and important was his use in society! I looked at him from a new standpoint, and saw him in a new relation.

"Commonplace!" said I, on regaining my own room in my own house, panting from the excitement and danger to which I had been subjected. "Commonplace! Thank God for the commonplace and the useful!"

Again I passed into the land of dreams, where I found myself walking in a pleasant way, pondering the theme which had taken such entire possession of my thoughts. As I moved along, I met the gifted one who had called my work dull and commonplace; that work was a simple picture of human life, drawn for the purpose of inspiring the reader with trust in God and love towards his fellow-man. He addressed me with the air of one who felt that he was superior, and led off the conversation by a brilliant display of words that half concealed, instead of making clear, his ideas. Though I perceived this, I was yet affected with admiration. My eyes were dazzled as by a glare of light.

"Yes, yes," I sighed to myself; "I am dull, tame, and commonplace beside these children of genius. How poor and mean is the work that comes from my hands!"

"Not so!" said my companion. I turned to look at him; but the gifted being stood not by my side. In his place was the ancient one who had before spoken to me in the voice of wisdom.

"Not so!" he continued. "Nothing that is useful is poor and mean. Look up! In the fruit of our labor is the proof of its quality."

I was in the midst of a small company, and the gifted being whose powers I had envied was there, the centre of attraction and the observed of all observers. He read to those assembled from a book; and what he read flashed with a brightness that was dazzling. All listened in the most rapt attention, and, by the power of what the gifted one read, soared now, in thought, among the stars, spread their wings upon the swift-moving tempest, or descended into the unknown depths of the earth. As for myself, my mind seemed endowed with new faculties, and to rise almost into the power of the infinite.

"Glorious! Divine! Godlike!" Such were the admiring words that fell from the lips of all.

And then the company dispersed. As we went forth from the room in which we had assembled, we met numbers who were needy, and sick, and suffering: mourners, who sighed for kind words from the comforter: little children, who had none to love and care for them: the faint and weary, who needed kind hands to help them on their toilsome journey. But no human sympathies were stirring in our hearts. We had been raised, by the power of the genius we so much admired, far above the world and its commonplace sympathies. The wings of our spirits were still beating the air, far away in the upper regions of transcendent thought.

Another change came. I saw a woman reading from the same book from which the gifted one had read. Ever and anon she paused, and gave utterance to words of admiration.

"Beautiful! beautiful!" fell, ever and anon, from her lips; and she would lift her eyes, and muse upon what she was reading. As she sat thus, a little child entered the room. He was crying.

"Mother! mother!" said the child, "I want——"

But the mother's thoughts were far above the

regions of the commonplace. Her mind was in a world of ideal beauty. Disturbed by the interruption, a slight frown contracted on her beautiful brows as she arose and took her child by the arm to thrust it from the room.

A slight shudder went through my frame as I marked the touching distress that overspread the countenance of the child as it looked up into its mother's face and saw nothing there but an angry frown.

"Every thought is born of affection," said the old man as this scene faded away, "and has in it the quality of the life that gave it birth; and when that thought is reproduced in the mind of another, it awakens its appropriate affection. If there had been a true love of his neighbor in the mind of the gifted one when he wrote the book from which the mother read, and if his purpose had been to inspire with human emotions—and none but these are God-like—the souls of men, his work would have filled the heart of that mother with a deeper love for her child, instead of freezing in her bosom the surface of love's celestial fountain. To have hearkened to the grief of that dear child, and to have ministered to its comfort, would have been a commonplace act, but, how truly noble and divine! And now, look again, and let what passes before you give strength to your wavering spirits."

I lifted my eyes, and saw a man reading, and I knew that he read that work of mine which the gifted one had condemned as dull, and tame, and commonplace. And, moreover, I knew that he was in trouble so deep as to be almost hopeless of the future, and just ready to give up his life-struggle, and let his hands fall listless and despairing by his side. Around him were gathered his wife and his little ones, and they were looking to him, but in vain, for the help they needed.

As the man read, I saw a light come suddenly into his face. He paused and seemed musing for a time; then his eyes gleamed quickly upwards, and as his lips parted these words came forth: "Yes, yes; it must be so. God is merciful as he is wise, and will not forsake his creatures. He tries us in the fires of adversity but to consume the evil of our hearts. I will trust him, and again go forth, with my eyes turned confidingly upwards." And the man went forth in the spirit of confidence in Heaven, inspired by what I had written.

"Look again," said the one by my side.

I looked, and saw the same man in the midst of a smiling family. His countenance was full of life and happiness, for his trust had not been in vain. As I had written, so he had found it. God is good, and lets no one feel the fires of adversity longer than is necessary for his purification from evil.

"Look again!" came like tones of music to my ear.

I looked, and saw one lying upon a bed. By the lines upon his brow, and the compression of his lips, it was evident that he was in bodily suffering. A book lay near him; it was written by the gifted one, and was full of bright thoughts and beautiful images. He took it, and tried to forget his pain in these thoughts and images. But in this he did not succeed, and soon laid it aside with a groan of anguish. Then there was handed to him my poor and commonplace work; and he opened the pages and began to read. I soon perceived that an interest was awakened in his mind. Gradually the contraction of his brow grew less severe, and, in a little while, he had forgotten his pain.

"I will be more patient," said he, in a calm voice, after he had read for a long time with a deep interest. "There are many with pain worse than mine to bear, who have none of the comforts and blessings so freely scattered along my way through life."

And then he gave directions to have relief sent to one and another whom he now remembered to be in need.

"It is a good work that prompts to good in others," said the old man. "What if it be dull and tame—commonplace to the few—it is a good gift to the world, and thousands will bless the giver. Look again!"

An angry mother, impatient and fretted by the conduct of a froward child, had driven her boy from her presence, when, if she had controlled her own feelings, she might have drawn him to her side and subdued him by the power of affection. She was unhappy, and her boy had received an injury.

The mother was alone. Before her was a table covered with books, and she took up one to read. I knew the volume; it was written by one whose genius had a deep power of fascination. Soon the mother became lost in its exciting pages, and remained buried in them for hours. At length, after turning the last page, she closed the book; and then came the thought of her wayward boy. But, her feelings toward him had undergone no change; she was still angry, because of his disobedience.

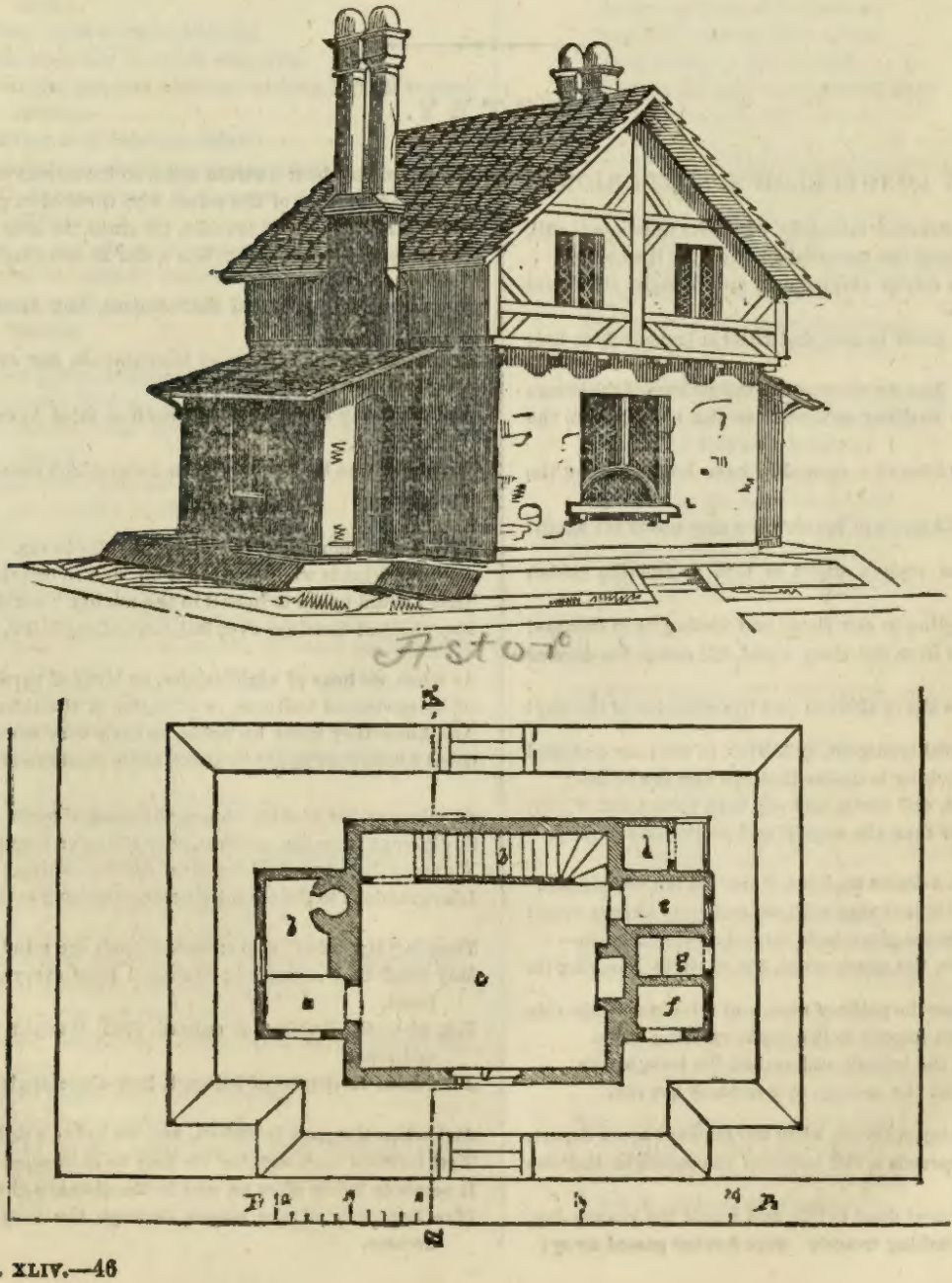
Another book lay upon the table; a book of no pretensions, and written with the simple purpose of doing good. It was commonplace, because it dealt with things in the common life around us. The mother took this up, opened to the title-page, turned a few leaves, and then laid it down again; sat thoughtful for some moments, and then sighed. Again she lifted the book, opened it, and commenced reading. In a little while she was all attention, and ere long I saw a tear stealing forth upon her cheek. Suddenly she closed the book, evincing strong emotion as she did so, and, rising up, went from the room. Ascending to a chamber above, she entered, and there found the boy at play. He looked towards her, and, remembering her anger, a shadow flitted across his face. But his mother smiled and looked kindly towards him. Instantly the boy dropped his playthings, and sprung to her side. She stooped and kissed him.

"Oh, mother! I do love you, and I will try to be good!"

Blinding tears came to my eyes, and I saw this scene no longer. I was out among the works of nature, and my instructor was by my side.

"Despise not again the humble and the commonplace," said he, "for upon these rest the happiness and well-being of the world. Few can enter into and appreciate the startling and the brilliant, but thousands and tens of thousands can feel and love the commonplace, that comes to their daily wants, and inspires them with a mutual sympathy. Go on in your work. Think it not low and mean to speak humble, yet true and fitting words for the humble; to lift up the bowed and grieving spirit; to pour the oil and wine of consolation for the poor and afflicted. It is a great and a good work—the very work in which God's angels delight. Yea, in doing this work, you are brought nearer in spirit to Him who is goodness and greatness itself, for all his acts are done with the end of blessing his creatures."

There was another change. I was awake. It was broad daylight, and the sun had come in and awakened me with a kiss. Again I resumed my work, content to meet the common want in my labors, and let the more gifted and brilliant ones around me enjoy the honors and fame that gathered in cloudy incense around them.

It is better to be loved by the many, than admired by the few.

MODEL COTTAGE.